

Network to Work Meeting

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RESOURCE DOCUMENT #1 – *WORKPLACE WELLNESS*

Managing Stress due to Difficult Relationships and Workplace Conflict

Our health and wellness can be negatively impacted when we have to deal with chronically “difficult” people or otherwise maintain ongoing negative relationships at work. Difficult people defy logic. Some are blissfully unaware of the negative impact that they have on those around them, and others seem to derive satisfaction from creating chaos and pushing other people’s buttons. Either way, they create unnecessary complexity, strife and worst of all stress. Whether their behavior is negativity, cruelty, the victim syndrome or just plain craziness, difficult people drive our brains into a stressed-out state that can have a lasting, negative impact, affecting us physically and emotionally.

Stress can also arise when we face a difficult or dissatisfying situation at work that we fail to address or confront – usually due to a fear of conflict. Many people are uncomfortable with confrontation. Some will hold complete conversations in their head about a difficult situation without ever letting the other person actually know what they are thinking and feeling. Avoiding conflict precludes any possibility of a real conversation that will address the situation, and so frustration and anger builds, worsening the situation.

Research has found that exposure to these kinds of stimuli provokes strong negative emotions that cause our brains to have a massive stress response. Stress is a formidable threat to our success -- when stress gets out of control, our brains and our workplace performance suffer.

Yet we can’t avoid situations or relationships that cause conflict when the person in question is a co-worker or boss.

The goal, then, is to minimize stress by learning and utilizing strategies that allow us:

- To be assertive in our communications;
- To overcome the fear of confrontation in order to resolve conflict;
- To manage our mindsets and behaviors when responding to difficult people.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT PEOPLE & CONFLICT

People use different communication styles when they confront difficult people or situations. Basic communication styles can be classified as “passive”, “assertive”, “aggressive”, or even “passive aggressive”. One way to reduce the stress that comes from conflict and dealing with difficult people is to learn to be more assertive in one’s communication.

Becoming More Assertive in our Communications

What Is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is the ability to express one’s feelings and assert one’s rights while respecting the feelings and rights of others. Assertive communication clarifies one’s needs in an appropriately direct, open and honest way. Assertiveness comes naturally to some, and is a skill that others can learn with some education and practice.

The ability to be appropriately assertive can significantly improve your mood and state of mind. It can also allow you to greatly reduce the level of interpersonal conflict in your life, thereby reducing a major source of stress and leading to stronger relationships. Assertive communication can help you handle difficult co-workers more easily, reducing drama and stress. A polite but assertive "no" to excessive requests from others will also enable you to avoid overloading your schedule and promote balance in your life. Ultimately, assertive communication empowers you to draw necessary boundaries with people that will allow you to get your needs met in relationships without alienating others and without letting resentment and anger creep in.

Differences among Communication Styles

Assertive:

Many people mistake assertiveness for aggressiveness, as both types of behavior involve standing up for one’s rights and expressing one’s needs. Assertiveness, however, is actually the balanced middle ground between aggressiveness and passivity. The key difference between the two styles is that ***individuals behaving assertively will express themselves in ways that respect the other person***. They assume the best about people, respect themselves, think “win-win” and try to compromise. Speaking assertively respects everyone’s needs and rights - including your own - and helps you to maintain boundaries in relationships while helping others feel respected at the same time.

Aggressive:

Individuals behaving aggressively tend to use tactics that are disrespectful, manipulative, demeaning, or abusive. They make negative assumptions about the motives of others and think in retaliatory terms, or they don't think of the other person's point of view at all. They win at the expense of others and create unnecessary conflict. Aggressiveness leads to hurt feelings and fractured relationships.

Passive:

Passive individuals don't know how to adequately communicate their feelings and needs to others. They tend to fear conflict so much that they let their needs go unmet and keep their feelings secret in order to 'keep the peace'. This passivity leads to stress and resentment, and sometimes even lashing out in the end. They let others win while they lose out; the problem with this is that everybody involved loses, at least to an extent.

Passive Aggressive:

The passive-aggressive individual appears passive on the surface but in reality is acting out anger in a subtle, indirect or behind-the-scenes way. They usually feel powerless, stuck and resentful – incapable of dealing directly with the object of their resentments. Consequently, they express their anger with another by subtly undermining them, exerting control with sarcasm and indicate communication.

What Does Assertiveness Look Like?

Here is how a scenario would play out, with examples of each style of communication behavior:

- **Scenario: Someone cuts in front of you at the supermarket.**
 - **Passive** communicator: Simply allows the person stay in front.
 - **Aggressive** communicator: Assumes the person did it on purpose and angrily says, *"Hey you jerk, no cuts!"*
 - **Passive-Aggressive** communicator: Smiles, says nothing, but then "accidentally" bumps into the person with his or her shopping cart.
 - **Assertive** communicator: Assumes the person didn't see them in line and politely says *"Excuse me, but I was in line"*.

The Benefits of Assertiveness

Assertive people tend to have fewer conflicts in their dealings with others, which translates into much less stress in their lives. They also get their needs met — which also means less stressing over unmet needs. Assertive people also help others to get their needs met, leading to stronger and more

supportive relationships which in turns helps with stress management and even leads to a healthier body.

In contrast, aggressiveness tends to alienate others and create unnecessary stress. Those on the receiving end of aggressive behavior tend to feel attacked and often avoid the aggressive individual. Over time, people who behave aggressively tend to have a string of failed relationships and little social support, and they don't always understand that this is related to their own behavior. Ironically, they often feel like victims, too.

Passive people aim to avoid conflict by avoiding communication about their needs and feelings, but this behavior damages relationships in the long run. They may feel like victims, but continue to avoid confrontation, becoming increasingly angry until, when they finally do say something, it comes out aggressively. The other party doesn't even know there's a problem until the formerly passive individual virtually explodes. This leads to hard feelings, weaker relationships, and more passivity.

Mental conversations can help us plan out what we want to say, and aggressive responses may feel good in the immediate moment. Neither, however, will resolve conflict or reduce stress.

Here's a model approach for having an effective, assertive conversation to address a difficult person or situation:

Scenario:

You have been working with your colleague, Ryan, for a month on a project to develop new office procedures. You are upset because you don't think he's given your boss any idea about your contributions but instead is trying to take all the credit. This makes you feel angry, frustrated, disrespected, and even a little concerned for your job. In the face of all these emotions, you are struggling with how to confront Ryan to discuss this with him.

STEPS:

1. **Posture:** Make sure your body reflects confidence: stand up straight, look people in the eye, and relax.
2. **Tone of voice:** Use a firm, but pleasant, tone.
3. **Don't assume:** Don't assume you know what Ryan's motives are, especially if you think they're negative.

4. **State the facts:** Practice stating the real issue in one or two **non-emotional, factual, nonjudgmental sentences.**

- a. **DON'T:** Your inclination may be to vent and rant in a torrent of emotion, but **avoid saying something like the following:**

This would be an ineffective, emotional and aggressive approach:

"You are really a jerk. You're trying to hog all the credit for the office procedures project and make me look like a lazy bum. You have purposely left my name off of everything. That is really lousy of you. I've heard rumors that you do this all the time; you really are an untrustworthy so and so."

- b. **DO:** Rather, state the facts as you believe them to be, and **be accurate about the effects of this behavior, avoiding judgment and exaggeration.**

This would be an appropriate, factual, assertive approach:

"It looks as if I played no role in the project to develop new office procedures. I haven't seen my name anywhere on any draft documents or in your emails, nor have I been given credit anywhere that I can see. I'm feeling disrespected and disregarded."

c. **USE "I" messages:**

- i. Saying *"I haven't seen . . ."* and *"I'm feeling . . ."* puts the focus on how you feel and how you are affected by the behavior. It shows that you are taking ownership of your reactions without attacking Ryan. He should be better able to take in your point of view.
- ii. Saying instead *"you're trying to hog credit"*, *"you have purposely"*, and *"you really are untrustworthy"* casts blame on Ryan, making him feel under attack and defensive.

5. **Stop talking:** Make your initial statement and allow room for a response.

- a. Say what you want to say (give your appropriate, assertive response), then just let Ryan respond. Don't interrupt or keep defending why you feel the way you do; it will generally just create an argument.
- b. You may think you know how Ryan is going to respond, however, it's a mistake to jump to that point and begin making counter arguments before he has the opportunity to respond.

6. Avoid arguing:

The inappropriate, aggressive approach with Ryan will likely make him quite defensive in his response. **He might respond by saying something like:**

"I'm not untrustworthy and I'm not trying to hog the credit. But you are a lazy bum, you're late a lot and you do crappy work!"

This could easily trigger an argument and the discussion could go off the rails. **However:**

Confrontation does not mean fight. It means that you need to state what you have say. Listen to what the other person has to say. Many times it actually ends right there.

It's not about proving one right or wrong or having someone take blame. Focus instead on getting your frustration off your chest and moving on.

7. **Know what you want:** Figure out the resolution you want before the confrontation.
 - a. If you aren't clear on what outcome you really want, your natural inclination might be to argue with Ryan to reassert your point that he is hogging credit and disrespecting you, prove you are right, and fight back against his attacks.
 - b. But, before you get into such argument, consider this: **is such an argument is really your desired outcome, or is it that you want to be respected, acknowledged and given credit now?**
8. **Stay on track.** Once you are clear on what you want, keep the conversation focused on the real issue of the confrontation and move the conversation toward the resolution you seek.
 - a. The issue is that you want to be respected by Ryan and be given credit for your efforts, and you want your name on the documentation. That's it.

It isn't about blaming Ryan, about whether you are right or Ryan is wrong, or whether he is untrustworthy or you are a lazy bum who does crappy work. It's all about getting the outcome you want.
 - b. So, you might say something like,

Appropriate, assertive response:

"I would appreciate if we use both of our names on any documentation, and include each other in all of the correspondence about the project."

- c. Ryan will either agree or disagree to the use of both names. Keep to the issue at this point, and avoid all temptation to get into an argument. Negotiate, but don't fight.
- d. **If necessary, just walk away. You've said what you need to say.**

9. **Putting it together.** This is what the ideal conversation would look like:

- **You say:** *"It looks as if I played no role in the project to develop new office procedures. I haven't seen my name anywhere on any draft documents or in your emails, nor have I been given credit anywhere that I can see. I'm feeling disrespected and disregarded."*
- **You then shut up.**
- **Ryan will respond however he chooses** – possibly by listening to understand, possibly by being defensive, arguing, and making accusations.
- **You avoid arguing and stay focused on your desired outcome. You say:**
 - *"I would appreciate if we use both of our names on any documentation, and include each other in all of the correspondence about the project."*
- **Together:** you negotiate a resolution. If Ryan is unwilling, you walk away. You've asserted yourself and said what needed to be said.
- **If necessary, you excuse yourself and walk away.**

You will rarely look forward to confrontation; you may never become completely comfortable with, or even skilled in confrontation. However, it is important for stress control and your physical and mental health that you say something when you are frustrated and angry. If you can't stand up for yourself, who will?

Adapted from:

Reduce Stress with Increased Assertiveness: Assertiveness: An Important Stress Management Technique, By Elizabeth Scott, MS, Updated September 30, 2017

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